

Kansas State University Professional Development School Partnership: Improvement for All

M. Gail Shroyer
Kansas State University

Sally Yahnke
Kansas State University

ABSTRACT: The vision of this large, well-established partnership is to collaboratively improve the College of Education's teacher preparation program while simultaneously reforming K-12 education for all students and educators within the partnership. This article describes this vision and the comprehensive mission of the intellectual engagement and development of all PDS participants through: (1) the clinical preparation of new teachers; (2) continuing professional development for all educators; (3) enhanced learning for ALL students and (4) the support of practice-based inquiry directed toward the improvement of teaching and learning. Specific strategies to achieve the vision and mission of the partnership are discussed and data are provided to support the partnership's success in realizing the established vision and mission.

The Kansas State University (KSU) College of Education has a very well established and successful PDS partnership that includes 3 local school districts with 14 elementary, 5 middle schools, and 2 high schools and 1 distant partner district. The KSU PDS partnership was established in 1989 on the premise that education must be viewed as a continuum from kindergarten through university and that significant improvements in one part of the system are not possible without improvements throughout. Based on this premise, the vision of this partnership is to collaboratively improve the College of Education's teacher preparation program while simultaneously reforming K-12 education for all students and educators within the partnership. To do so, the partnership capitalizes on the collaborative inclinations, experiences, and needs of the many educational partners in our community to demonstrate how to help all K-16 students achieve high academic standards. By placing equity and teacher quality at the center of everything we do with educators K-16, the partnership is able to shape the content and pedagogical knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to effectively meet the challenging needs of ALL learners.

To reach our vision of K-16 simultaneous renewal, the comprehensive mission of our PDS partnership is to promote the intellectual engagement and development of all PDS participants through: (1) the clinical preparation of new teachers; (2) continuing professional development for all educators; (3) enhanced learning for ALL students and (4) the support of practice-based inquiry directed toward the improvement of teaching and learning. Our PDS partnership is grounded in the development of this mission that everyone understands, believes, and celebrates. All decisions made concerning the day in and day out operation of our PDS are filtered through the four identified areas of our mission.

Clinical preparation

Teacher preparation is an extremely complex process that molds and shapes the ever-changing behaviors of the classroom teacher. The PDS facilitates systematic field experiences within realistically complex environments to support this holistic understanding of teaching. Elementary education teacher candidates are placed in

two or more of the 14 elementary PDS sites for four different field experiences where they are actively engaged in the school community. This includes an early field experience, a field experience that focuses on developing skills in planning and teaching in early literacy and science, another field experience that focuses on planning and teaching lessons in the areas of intermediate literacy, social studies and math. All elementary teacher candidates complete their field experiences with 16 weeks of full-time student teaching in one of the PDS.

Secondary teacher candidates also are actively engaged in the school community by participating in four field experiences completed within 3 high schools and 5 middle schools. They participate in an early field experience, an integrated middle school field experience, and a 10–16 week content specific field experience before completing 16 weeks of full-time student teaching.

During the student teaching experience, teacher candidates in both elementary and secondary education are completely immersed in the school community. They participate in faculty meetings, professional development opportunities, school improvement meetings, parent teacher conferences, student IEP meetings, and assist in the delivery and scoring of state assessments.

Since the full implementation of our PDS model, teacher candidate achievement has increased continuously in the KSU Teacher Education Program as measured by the national teaching exams required for licensure in Kansas (the ETS Principles of Teaching and Learning [PLT] and Praxis II Academic Content Exams). KSU teacher education candidates scored higher than state and national averages on almost all exams taken in 2009 (99% pass rate on the PLT and 95% pass rate on All Academic Content Areas).

Continuing professional development for all educators

Continuous professional development for all partners has been critical to the success of our

PDS partnership. Partners view pre-service and in-service education as an inseparable continuum. The aim is to learn and grow together as a community of learners; therefore, professional development is based on needs identified through annual assessments and partners practice data-based decision making.

Professional development opportunities offered within the partnership provide novice and experienced educators in the PDS and at KSU with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and resources to empower them to create teaching and learning environments to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. School-based student teaching seminars, cooperating teacher meetings, faculty meetings, new teacher mentoring programs, book studies, college-wide diversity brown bag sessions, peer collaboration/peer coaching, and professional development opportunities offered through a variety of special projects allow all PDS participants to reflect on their teaching and learning with peers across the K-16 educational continuum.

Over the past six years, 1,211 new teachers in partner districts were mentored by 512 trained mentors due to PDS partnership initiatives and 89% of these new teachers “agreed” or “strongly agreed” they were “confident in their teaching skills” and “prepared to remain in teaching.” During this same six-year period, over 100 PDS teachers and 60 faculty from the colleges of education and arts and sciences received professional development each summer during PDS-sponsored Summer Institutes. Participating teachers demonstrated significant gains on pre- and post-assessments of content and pedagogy and surveys indicated participants felt “competent” to apply “effective teaching,” “curriculum renewal,” “standards-based teaching,” and “diversity strategies.”

Enhanced learning for all students

The PDS partnership has made a commitment to improving K-12 teaching and learning while enhancing teacher education. The large num-

bers of KSU teacher candidates and faculty working with each PDS have provided extra resources, people, and support to help all children reach higher levels of academic excellence. Evidence of student learning has been collected and analyzed each year since the partnership was created. During the past ten years of the partnership, district mean scores in mathematics, science, and reading have increased at all grades tested and achievement gaps have decreased as measured by annual state assessments of K-12 students. Additionally, PDS student scores on K-12 state assessments in 2009 were higher than state averages.

State assessment data in addition to teacher and undergraduate student action research data are shared at college faculty meetings, Clinical Instructor (CI) Meetings, PDS meetings, and during professional development sessions. Partners have attempted to create a culture of data-based decision making and innovative practice across the PDS partnership. PDS teachers and administrators along with faculty from the College of Education and the College of Arts & Sciences review innovative practices and student data on a regular basis looking for evidence of student growth, identifying needs, reflecting on current practices, and creating opportunities to further enhance the teaching and learning process. Professional development opportunities are based on this continuous analysis and undergraduate field experience opportunities are redesigned regularly based on K-12 student learning needs.

Practice-based inquiry

The PDS partnership has been committed to discovering and then sharing best practices since its beginnings. In order to discover what works and to use this knowledge to enhance practices, a continuous cycle of improvement has been established to assess the partnership, learn from both our strengths and weaknesses, and share our new understandings across the partnership and beyond. PDS partners established mechanisms for learning from one another within the

partnership, such as bi-monthly CI Meetings, annual K-12 Teacher Share Fairs, and Summer Institutes. In addition, data is collected using multiple methods across the partnership to capture the efforts, perspectives, and learning of all those involved.

Yearly assessments of each field experience and the PDS partnership in general are conducted by surveying PDS parents, PDS students, PDS administrators, PDS teachers, KSU faculty, and KSU teacher candidates. The findings of these assessments are reviewed and used to make improvements in field experiences and PDS roles and responsibilities, and activities for the following year. The impact of the PDS partnership on participating teachers and faculty and their teaching practices is assessed through surveys and interviews with all participants. The impact of the PDS partnership on K-12 student learning is examined through an annual analysis of state assessment data and the results of teacher action research. The impact of the PDS partnership on teacher candidate learning is explored through an annual analysis of scores on national teaching exams required for licensure. These multiple assessment strategies promote a culture of inquiry and innovation that supports teaching and learning across the educational continuum.

Conclusion

Due to the commitment of all participants, the PDS partnership has made great strides in developing a strong culture for learning across the K-16 educational continuum. We are most proud of the established relationships, which have fostered collaboration, reflection, and inquiry over the past 22 years. An analysis of 857 surveys of PDS administrators, teachers, student teachers, and university faculty indicate they “agree” or “strongly agree” that “candidates are developing skills and knowledge needed for success as beginning teachers as a result of their involvement in the PDS Partnership,” that partnership activities have helped them grow as professionals, and that they have noticed positive changes at their school and the

KSU teacher education program as a result of the PDS partnership. Participants “strongly agree” that the partnership promotes “a collegial community of learners” with high “levels of respect among all members of the partnership.”

Through our commitment to continuous growth and development, the partnership has been able to simultaneously improve K-12 teaching and learning as well as the KSU teacher education program. Our collective efforts over the last 22 years have provided us the opportunity to continually focus on our vision of K-16 simultaneous renewal and our mission to promote the intellectual engage-

ment and development of all PDS participants. ^{SUP}



M. Gail Shroyer is Professor and Department Chair of Curriculum and Instruction at Kansas State University.

Sally Yahnke is Associate Professor and coordinates the KSU PDS Partnership at Kansas State University.